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ABSTRACT

Available empirical evidence indicates that the deterioration of stable marriages and families has been a principal generator of moral decline. Children learn moral values mainly within their families, and mainly by relying on their parents as role models. Family conditions for modeling values, together with recent family trends that have impacted the process, have led to declining family time. Two fundamental social changes are necessary to remedy the situation: revitalizing the institution of marriage, and reorganizing work lives. (Author/EV)

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WE ARE WHAT WE SEE

The Family Conditions for Modeling Values for Children

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In a recent poll of adult Americans conducted by The Wall Street Journal, "moral decline" was stated to be the biggest problem that America will face in the next twenty years. And when asked what the biggest change in American character has been since the 1950s, the leading answer was "less stable marriages and families."[1] I agree with these popular assessments and believe that the two issues are closely related. The available empirical evidence indicates that deterioration of stable marriages and families has been a principal generator of moral decline. This is because children learn moral values mainly within their families, and mainly by relying on their parents as role models. When families are unstable, when parents are absent, emotionally distant, or preoccupied, or when parents themselves are immoral, the learning of moral values by children is greatly hindered. In this essay I will discuss why parents have been failing at modeling moral values for children, focusing on parenting time and other family conditions for childrearing.

Modeling

When something appears to be "not right" or out of order, as when a common pattern of behavior is suddenly not followed, my twenty two month old granddaughter points and says, "oh, oh." For example, when she was in the back seat of our car strapped into her car seat and I started to drive off without first securing my seat belt, she pointed at me and said, "oh, oh." She has learned her lessons well—by seeing.

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The New York Times recently ran an article with the headline "If Drivers Buckle Up, Children Do, Study Finds."[2] The study, conducted by the Air Bag Safety Campaign, reported that "The evidence is clear: to get children buckled up, we must get drivers buckled up." Seat-belt use studies from more than 10 states showed that "more than 80 percent of children were buckled in when their adults used their seat belts. But when parents were not buckled up, restraint use for younger children ranged from 11 percent to 56 percent." To make sure no one misunderstood the true nature of this phenomenon, the *Times* turned to Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater, who said, "parents must buckle up because children follow their example." In other words, monkey see, monkey do. (I can only add that, when children are as well socialized as my granddaughter, the process can work in reverse.)

In the world of the social sciences, this phenomenon is known as modeling. And it is one of the most fundamental dimensions of raising a moral, prosocial child. Children pay more attention to what an adult does than to what an adult merely says. As psychologist Nancy Eisenberg reports, "socializers who preach...but do not model...may have little positive effect on children's prosocial development."[3] This, of course, is a common and simple insight, yet it opens up a profound perspective on modern society and its effects on children. For in order to determine what values children are learning as they grow up, we must look first at what adults are doing, not what they are saying; at the way things appear to children, not the way things appear to us. Most important of all, for children to learn values from their parents through modeling, the parents must have a regular, active and continuing presence in the lives of their children. Unfortunately, parents in modern times are increasingly absent from their children's lives during the growing-up years.

Everything we know about human behavior suggests that the family is the institution in which most children learn about character and morality. The schools, the

churches, and the law can all help in the process of character development, but they have much less independent force of their own. Their main function is to reinforce what has already been taught in the home. If morality and character are not taught in the home, other institutions can not be relied on to undo the damage. That is why the quality of family life is so important, and why the family is society's most fundamental institution.

Childhood: A Brief Historical Review

The changes in Western childhood over the past few centuries have been remarkable. In the preindustrial era in Europe, an era of high infant and child mortality when life for many was "nasty, brutish and short," childhood does not seem to have been regarded as a sphere of life entirely separate from adulthood. Children were considered "little adults" and, as soon they were able, they were expected to perform adult duties. With the struggle for existence dominating all of life, there was little time for childhood or childrearing as we think of them today.

With the rise several centuries ago of the industrial revolution and the modern nuclear family—the family of husband and wife living apart from other relatives, childhood became a very different phenomenon. The new economic conditions enabled many mothers to devote themselves full time to childrearing, the home became a mostly private sphere, and the view of children and childhood significantly changed. Children came to be regarded as very different from adults, and childhood became a time of play, diminished work responsibilities, and formal learning. The quality of early childhood experiences began to be conceived as having a major influence on adult outcomes, and each child was considered to have a unique personality to be developed, rather than being born with vices that needed to be expunged. The new family put child development at its highest level of priority. To help families the commercial toy industry

came into being, along with the children's book industry and a great variety of facilities and services designed especially for children.

While these changes may not have generated a "golden age" for children, they certainly represented a monumental improvement over the way children had been raised in the past. Moreover, a strong case can be made that the family form that pioneered this new notion of childhood was instrumental in generating many of the social achievements of modern time, especially achievement-oriented individualism and liberal democracy. For it is surely the case that the character of the family shapes the character of the society as much as vice versa and these were the values that were taught in the new bourgeois home.[4]

Today, much of modern society is beginning to revert to the earlier preindustrial pattern. While life is far more secure economically and medically for most children than ever before, and childrearing methods have grown increasingly less punitive and authoritarian, many aspects of the domestic scene have grown worse for children. With the incursions of advertising and the organized entertainment industry, and the often sex and violence-saturated popular culture they are driving, childhood is no longer the relatively protected period that it has been in recent centuries. Children are thrust into an adult culture at an early age, just as they once were in the older era.

The environment of childrearing has deteriorated in other respects as well. Many communities have become less safe and more anonymous, and childrearing families feel ever more isolated. Reports of child abuse and neglect have quintupled over the past two decades since detailed records have been kept. Perhaps worst of all because it is so widespread and so consequential, the crucial amount of time that parents spend raising their children has diminished, largely due to absent fathers and mothers in the workplace.

This new set of childrearing conditions has had unfortunate and predictable consequences for the wellbeing of children. Juvenile delinquency has increased nearly 600% in the past three decades, and teen suicide has tripled. Juvenile violence has become much more lethal. Marked increases among teenagers have been seen in substance abuse, in eating disorders and in rates of depression. In other words, while societies have advanced economically, the moral and emotional condition of children and youth has deteriorated. The tragic irony is that economic advance was supposed have improved the lives of the young, and thereby the quality of future generations.

What do Children See?

As they look around today, what do children see? In particular, what do they see that appears to be "not right," things that would cause my all-knowing granddaughter to say, "oh, oh," things whose values one would not wish children to try to copy. First, they see their parents breaking up. Over 50% of children today will spend some time living with just one parent by the time they reach age 18. Second, many will lose contact their fathers. Some 40% of children today are living apart from their natural fathers, and most of these children see their fathers seldom, if at all. With nearly a third of children now born out-of-wedlock, many will grow up without ever knowing their fathers.[5]

Third, children see both parents rushing off to work, leaving them in the care of someone else, a "childcare provider." 52% of children under five have mothers who are employed full or part-time.[6] According to sociologist Arlie Hochschild a growing number of parents face a time bind--the more time they spend at work, the more hectic home becomes, and the more they want to escape back to work. Eventually, work becomes their home, and home becomes work.[7]

Fourth, as children venture outside the home they encounter a local residential environment that is often crime-ridden and unsafe. Moreover, it has almost entirely been

given over to the automobile rather than the pedestrian, especially the child-pedestrian. Many children can barely leave home except in an adult-driven car, and many new communities don't even have sidewalks. With the automobiling of America, children have become largely disenfranchised from access to many community facilities and services and totally dependent on their parents for transportation. Unfortunately, the parents necessary to provide that transportation are often not around.

Fifth, children see a popular culture as produced by the organized entertainment industry and transmitted by the media that is overloaded with adult sexuality and violence, and dominated by materialistic values. This is what their absent parents are supposed to protect them from.

In all of these ways, society today is turning away from the needs of children. Incredible though it may seem, because societal development has always implied a better future for our children, modern society is becoming ever more adult-centered. Adults have more freedom than ever, especially freedom for their own self-development and self-fulfillment, while children grow up in an ever more toxic environment.

The nature of the new toxic environment, of course, is different from the toxic environments of times past. Once children were beaten, now they are neglected; once they went hungry, now they are materially spoiled; once they lived in overcrowded conditions, now they sometimes live in virtual isolation. The most consequential change, particularly in recent decades, is a deterioration in the bond between parents and children. No longer can children count on what they need most—loving parents devoted to their wellbeing who act as good role models and protect them from harm.

The absence, emotional distance or preoccupation of parents strikes at the very heart of those values which we hope children are learning—trustworthiness, respect for others, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Each of these is learned primarily through interactions between parents and children, interactions in which it is mandatory

for parents to be physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually present and involved in the lives of their children.

How Children Learn Moral Values and Develop Character

Within the family, there are three key processes by which children learn character and morality: forming emotional attachments, being taught prosocial behavior, and learning respect for authority and compliance with rules. All teaching of right and wrong begins with attachment—the warm, emotional tie that children have with their parents. Children learn from and are influenced most by those persons who are most meaningful to them, and the most meaningful adults are those to whom the child is emotionally attached. If a child does not have a strong emotional attachment to a parent, the effectiveness of the parent as a teacher and moral guide is greatly diminished. As social psychologist Willard W. Hartup has concluded, "A child's effectiveness in dealing with the social world emerges largely from experience in close relationships."[8]

While many of the failures of moral development in children stem from poor attachment to parents, attachment alone is not enough. Prosocial behavior and moral values must be purposely taught, modeled, and reinforced by parents and other caregivers. A good example must continually be set. Indeed, strongly attached children will follow the example of parents' behavior even when it is bad.

One of the main approaches to teaching prosocial behavior is to build on a child's instinctive feelings of empathy, for example through the regular use of reasoning and "inductions" in behavior management. This involves pointing out the consequences of the child's behavior on other people ("Look at the way you hurt her; now she feels bad"). Such an approach is far preferable to "power-assertive" forms of discipline that involve physical punishment or the deprivation of privileges. The latter can lead more often to the trait of self-protection than to the development of prosocial behavior.

Finally, it is important to instill in children a respect for authority and a sense of obligation to comply with social rules. Social psychologist William Damon puts the issue forcefully: "the child's respect for this authority is the single most important moral legacy that comes out of the child's relationship with the parent."[9] Character traits based on respect for authority and social rules, such as honesty, cooperation, responsibility, and self-reliance, are learned first within the family sphere. If learned well, these traits are then transferred beyond the family to dealings with society at large.

These processes by which character and morality are taught to children, attachment, prosocial behavior, and respect for authority and rules, all have one thing in common. They each require an immense amount of contact time between parents and their children. The parent must be physically present and emotionally, intellectually, and morally engaged.

Family Structure and Time

What kind of family is likely to be most successful at instilling character and moral values in its children? Here are its key characteristics: An enduring, two-biological-parent family that engages regularly in activities together, has many of its own routines, traditions and stories, and provides a great deal of contact between adults and children. The children have frequent interaction with relatives, with neighbors in a supportive neighborhood, and with their parents' world of work, coupled with no pervasive worry that their parents will break up. The family develops a vibrant family subculture that provides a rich legacy of meaning for children throughout their lives.

One should add that, in today's family-averse popular culture, strong, self-contained families are more important than ever. Childrearing families must do everything they can to insulate their children from many aspects of the outside world. The more time children can spend in family activities, and the less time spent with peers

and the media, the better. Family sub-cultures need to incorporate something of an us-against-them philosophy, an issue around which it is no doubt useful for many families to band together.

Most of the family characteristics noted above are self-evident. The issue of biological parenting is controversial and requires some clarification. All organisms have evolved through natural selection primarily to survive, reproduce and parent so as successfully to pass on their genes into the next generation. Human beings have a set of cognitive, emotional and behavioral predispositions that are encoded in their genes. It is almost certainly the case, therefore, that family behaviors—including courtship, mating, parenting, and relations with kin—are more than just arbitrary social constructs. Each of our relatives shares some of our genes, and it therefore makes evolutionary sense to nurture those genetic kin. This is why we tend to favor our relatives, and why parents tend to put so much effort into raising their biological offspring. Indeed, the parental relationship is unique in human affairs because the reciprocity of social benefits is not a major consideration.

This is not to say that stepparents are inherently unloving—many, of course, are intensely loving, as are adoptive families. But it is to say that parental feelings and parental love are inherently more difficult to develop among persons unrelated to a given child. Stepfamilies are one of the fastest growing family forms in America. An estimated one third of all children today may be expected to become stepchildren before they reach age 18. I do not mean to cast aspersions on all stepfamilies; many stepfamilies are necessary and inevitable. But the child outcomes of stepfamilies have been found to be markedly worse than the child outcomes of biological families, and the rapid growth of stepfamilies should certainly not be viewed as favorable from a child's, or from society's, perspective.

Time spent with children--quantity time--is arguably the central ingredient of the good family. There is surely a strong correlation between the amount of time parents spend with their children, and the adult character of those children. The idea of "quality time" is largely a myth, the convenient rationalization of pre-occupied parents. In good childrearing, time short cuts are few and far between.

What to do?

What can we, as a society, do to remedy this situation? Fundamentally, as parents, we must find ways to spend more time with our children. This may require working fewer hours and "voluntary simplicity" for those who can afford it; turning off the TV set; finding employment in firms that have family-friendly policies, such as flexible work hours; holding off having children until one can afford them; and living in areas where the cost of living is lower. Life is long and the childrearing years are short, and it is unconscionable that in this age of affluence so many of our children are left hanging out to dry.

For society as a whole, two fundamental changes are necessary:

Revitalize marriage. Marriage is what holds men to the mother-child bond. As marriage weakens, fathers become disengaged from their children. To re-engage men in childrearing, we must revitalize marriage—which means finding ways to build stronger marriages, and to limit divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing.

Reorganize work. People are retiring from work at ever-earlier ages, when they are still healthy and fully functioning. At the same time, childrearing couples are under enormous pressure to work ever-longer hours. We have to find a way to reorganize our work lives so that we can take time off when our children are young, and make up for the time when we are older and our children are grown.

Conclusion

Families today are under siege and children are being hurt. More and more children are growing up with weak attachments, little empathy, and a weakened respect for law and order and civility. More than from anyone else children learn values from their parents, and they learn best by copying their parents' actions. Successful childrearing requires the active and continuing physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual presence of parents in the lives of their children. Those parents who spend the most time in childrearing, other things equal, will have the best child outcomes.

Children are our future. In the recent Wall Street Journal poll, when asked the question, "What ways do you think the American character is going to change in the twenty-first century," only 20% of young adults answered "more importance placed on marriage and children."[10] If the other 80% are right, if more importance is not placed on marriage and children, I suggest that this nation's future is in considerable peril.

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[1] March 5, 1998, p. A-14
[2] Feb. 11, 1998, p. A15
[3] Eisenberg, Nancy. The Caring Child (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)
[4] See: Berger, Brigitte. "The Social Roots of Prosperity and Liberty," Society 35-3:44-53, 1998
[5] See: Popenoe, David. Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society. (New York: The Free Press, 1996)
[6] Data for 1994 from U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Who's Minding Our Preschoolers?"
[7] Hochschild, Arlie Russell. The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997)
[8] Hartup, Willard W. "Social Relationships and Their Developmental Significance." American Psychologist 44-2:120-126, 1989
[9] Damon, William. The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 52
[10] March 5, 1998, p. A-14

Abstract

"We Are What We See"

Available empirical evidence indicates that the deterioration of stable marriages and families has been a principal generator of moral decline. This is because children learn moral values mainly within their families, and mainly by relying on their parents as role models. The family conditions for modeling values are discussed, together with recent family trends that have impacted the process, focusing on declining family time. To remedy the situation two fundamental social changes are necessary: revitalizing the institution of marriage, and reorganizing our work lives.

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